DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 471 053 UD 035 385

AUTHOR	Johnson, Tammy; Fiana, Libero Della; Burlingame, Phyllida
TITLE	Vouchers: A Trap, Not a Choice. California School Vouchers Will Increase Racial Inequaltiy.
INSTITUTION	Applied Research Center, Oakland, CA.
PUB DATE	2000-10-00
NOTE	36p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Applied Research Center, 3781 Broadway, Oakland, CA 94611. Tel: 510-653-3415; Fax: 510-653-3427; e-mail: erase@arc.org. For full text: http://www.arc.org/erase/.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Quality; *Educational Vouchers; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; Low Income Groups; *Minority Group Children; Private Schools; *Racial Bias; *School Choice; State Legislation
IDENTIFIERS	California

ABSTRACT

This report asserts that there are inaccuracies in proponents' claims that vouchers represent an opportunity for families of color to achieve a more equitable education for their children. Six sections discuss "The Problematic Background of Proposition 38 and Other Voucher Programs" (the racist history of vouchers and the current national picture); "How Vouchers Can Lead to Discrimination: Parents Don't Get to Choose, Schools Do" (private schools can deny admission to voucher students, and there is no way to hold private schools accountable for racism); "Vouchers Exacerbate Existing Inequality" (universal choice means white choice, private schools lack services that low income people need, and the voucher amount is not enough to establish good schools); "A California Voucher Program Would Leave Most Students of Color in Weakened Public Schools"; "Support for Education Reform Does Not Equal Support for Proposition 38" (polls are misleading, voucher support cannot be isolated from support for general education reform, and support is not based on realities of voucher programs); and "A Real Reform for People of Color: Equity and Excellence for Everyone" (the SMART Schools proposal, which stands for Small classes and schools, Money for quality education, Authentic assessment and high standards, Racial and economic equity in educational policies and opportunities, and Top-notch teaching and rigorous curriculum). (Contains 80 endnotes.) (SM)

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ED 471 053

Vouchers: A Trap, Not A Choice
California School Vouchers Will Increase Racial Inequality

Tammy Johnson, Libero Della Piana and Phyllida Burlingame
Applied Research Center
October 2000

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INTRODUCTION

Dangling the conservatives' voucher agenda in front of the nation's most disenfranchised Americans under the guise of helping them is both immoral and hypocritical. Inner-city parents whose schools are not performing well are desperate for solutions and the Religious Right is exploiting that frustration.

— Timothy McDonald, chair,
African American Ministers Leadership Council[1]

In November 2000, Californians will vote on whether to change their public school system to one based on vouchers. The ballot initiative, Proposition 38, is billed by its supporters as a "school choice" measure that will empower low-income parents of color whose children are stuck in inadequate public schools. But the public school system's failure to provide students of color with a challenging education equal to that available in wealthy white neighborhoods will not be alleviated by vouchers. In fact, research shows the opposite: vouchers would hurt families of color and low-income families while benefiting more affluent white families. Vouchers are not a cure for the problems of California's schools–they are a scam enabling the already privileged to send their children to private schools with taxpayers' assistance.

This report exposes the inaccuracies and hypocrisy of proponents' claims that vouchers represent an opportunity for families of color to achieve a more equitable education for their children. In particular, it shows that:

1. **Vouchers have a history of serving racist agendas.** School vouchers were first used by whites in the South to avoid public school desegregation and their primary backers include the authors of *The Bell Curve* who argue that vouchers should be used to separate genetically intelligent (i.e., white) students from their genetic inferiors.

2. **California's Proposition 38 allows private schools to discriminate against voucher students.** Under this measure, a voucher would be no guarantee of escape from public school. Private schools would still be able to reject students for any reason—English-language proficiency, disciplinary records, previous academic records, ability to pay higher tuition—or for no reason at all. They would be under no obligation to explain to students why they were rejected, and there would be no due process remedies for families who believed they had been discriminated against.

3. Vouchers exacerbate the existing racial inequality of the public school system. Voucher experiments in other countries benefit the rich at the expense of the poor and have resulted in lower academic achievement for low-income students. Experts on voucher programs in the United States assert that open-ended voucher programs here would primarily benefit wealthy white families. Most vouchers in the few existing programs in the U.S. go to students who were already in private schools.

4. California's Proposition 38 will leave most students of color in weakened public schools. Private schools in California can accommodate fewer than 1% of current public school students; they simply have no space for more. Proposition 38 has no measures to ensure that the few spaces available in private schools would be equitably distributed. Voucher programs elsewhere have diverted resources away from public school students to the voucher program so that low-income students remain in schools that even more financially strapped.

5. True public school reform should be based on the "3 E's" Excellence and Equity for Everyone. Many people of color are working hard to improve the public schools and demanding that students of color have equal access to high-quality education. Vouchers do not produce equal access or guarantee higher academic achievement for students. The Applied Research Center's SMART Schools proposal points the way to educational equity.

THE PROBLEMATIC BACKGROUND OF PROPOSITION 38 AND OTHER VOUCHER PROGRAMS

The California initiative, Proposition 38, would give a voucher worth $4,000 to parents of school-age children to use as tuition in private schools, including religious schools. For the first year, vouchers would be limited to students who were previously in public schools or to new kindergartners; current private-school students would be phased into the program over a three-year period. There would be no income cap or any preference for low-income families—a millionaire family already planning to send its children to private schools would be as eligible as a low-income family struggling to get its children a good education from a bad public school. Moreover, as will be discussed in more detail later, children from the wealthy family would be much more likely to actually be able to attend the private school.

Children from a wealthy family would be much more likely to actually be able to attend a private school.

The proposition claims to raise per-pupil spending to the national average, which in 1998-99 was more than $1,000 below the national average ($6,915 versus $5,751).[2] However, this claim is false–the proposition simply allows the legislature to raise per-pupil spending, an action it could take with or without the voucher scheme in place. The pro-voucher campaign has admitted that it is trying to mislead voters. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Chris Bertelli, a spokesperson for the voucher campaign, said the language is meant to sweeten the sound of the measure in the eyes of voters. 'Sure it is,' Bertelli said, adding that the provision would not fatten school coffers."[3] Actually, the already under-funded schools would be further drained of resources under the voucher program: California's non-partisan legislative analyst's office estimates that public school districts would lose almost $7,000 in state funding for each voucher student and anticipates that the overall net cost of the voucher program could be as high as $1.1 billion for the first several years.[4]

Proposition 38 was placed on the ballot by billionaire Silicon-Valley venture capitalist Tim Draper. Draper, whose inherited fortune funded his business ventures, has said that he is prepared to spend more than $20 million out of his own pocket to fund the initiative. In just the first three months of 2000, Draper poured close to $2 million into the campaign, primarily to hire professional signature-gatherers to put Proposition 38 on the ballot. Draper previously contributed to the campaigns of conservative former attorney general Dan Lungren and former governor Pete Wilson. Wilson appointed Draper to the California Board of Education, but his appointment was not confirmed by Wilson's successor, Governor Gray Davis. Known for driving a gold Mercedes, Draper has called the public schools "socialistic" and has advocated cutting the government's share of the gross domestic product in half.[5]

Vouchers were first introduced in the United States by southern states seeking to avoid court-ordered desegregation of the public schools.

This year's proposition is not the first effort to bring vouchers to California. In 1993, a similar ballot measure, Proposition 174, was defeated by voters 70%-30%. In 1996, Governor Wilson proposed a voucher program he labeled "opportunity scholarships." His plan was killed by the legislature.

Proposition 38 is opposed by leading organizations representing people of color in the state, such as the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund, Chinese for Affirmative Action, the Northern California Coalition for Immigrant Rights, and Californians for Justice. Prominent government figures of color such as Lt. Governor Cruz Bustamante, L.A. City Councilmember Alex Padilla, Congresswoman Barbara Lee, and Assemblyman Antonio Villaraigosa have joined efforts against it. Vouchers are also opposed by national civil rights organizations and legislators, including the NAACP, the National Council of La Raza, the National Black Caucus of State Legislators, and U.S. Representative Jesse Jackson, Jr. of Illinois.

The History of Vouchers Serving Racist Agendas

Vouchers were first introduced in the United States by southern states seeking to avoid court-ordered desegregation of the public schools. Throughout the South, white parents withdrew their children from public schools and established private "white-flight academies," which were often indirectly publicly funded. The most famous of these efforts was in Prince Edward County, Virginia, which closed its public schools rather than comply with an order to desegregate them. The county and state then provided vouchers that the white students used to attend all-white private schools, while the African American community was denied formal education for a four-year period. The U.S. Supreme Court struck down the program as unconstitutional.[6]

The infamous battle over desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas took a similar turn.After courts forced the city to admit the "Little Rock Nine" in 1957, voters the following year approved closing the public schools rather than allowing any African American students to attend. The school board then planned to lease the schools to a private school corporation that would maintain segregation. A federal circuit court stopped the plan, and the Supreme Court ruled that the law forbade "evasive schemes for segregation."[7]

Much of the contemporary mainstream support for vouchers has entered public discussion from racist sources. For example, in their notorious but influential 1994

book *The Bell Curve*Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein argued that it was a waste of money and effort to provide equitable education to people of color and that education resources should instead be concentrated on "gifted" or genetically intelligent (by which they mean white) students. How to do this? Through vouchers, which would allow genetically intelligent students to separate from the other, inferior students.[8]

One of the nation's most vocal voucher supporters today is Clint Bolick of the Washington-based Institute for Justice. Bolick leapt into the public spotlight by labeling Lani Guinier, the African American legal scholar who was President Clinton's original choice for attorney general, the "quota queen." He has since argued strongly against including any civil rights protections in proposed federal voucher legislation.[9]

The Current National Picture

George W. Bush, the Republican presidential nominee, has proposed a federal voucher program in place of the current Title 1 program that provides schools with additional funding to help low-income students. Bush proposes making Title 1 and matching state funds "portable" by giving low-income families of students in failing public schools $1,500 vouchers to use toward tuition at a private school. Since that amount would serve as full tuition at few if any private schools, and families qualifying for Title 1 are unlikely to be able to contribute financially to make up the difference in actual tuition, the plan would weaken the Title 1 program and drain resources from struggling public schools, while being of no benefit at all to most low-income students.[10] Vice-President Gore, the Democratic candidate, opposes this plan, as well as California's Proposition 38. George W. Bush, while he supports vouchers in general, has not yet taken a position on Proposition 38.

Three limited voucher programs currently exist in the United States: in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and the state of Florida. Their basic elements include:

- **Income eligibility**. In Milwaukee, only families earning up to 175% of the federal poverty limit can participate; in Cleveland, a lottery is supposed to give preference to low-income families, and families earning 200% of the federal poverty limit or above receive vouchers worth $375 less than low-income families, but there is no income cap; in Florida, there are no income guidelines.

- **Voucher amount**. Parents receive vouchers worth approximately $5,000 in Milwaukee; $4,000 in Florida; and $2,250 for low-income families in Cleveland.

Despite their safeguards, existing programs have ended up benefiting a wealthier, whiter population than proponents claimed they would in order to win their passage.

These amounts are less than both the national average of public school per-pupil spending—$6,915—and the average tuition of private schools in the National Association of Independent Schools—$10,300.[11]

- **Tuition cap.** In Milwaukee and Florida, schools that accept voucher students are not allowed to charge additional tuition; there is no such rule in Cleveland.
- **Admission requirements.** Voucher students may attend private schools, including religious schools, in all three programs. In Milwaukee and Cleveland, schools must admit voucher students without regard to previous academic records.
- **Geographic limits.** In Milwaukee and Cleveland, only families within the city districts can participate; in Florida, there are no geographic requirements—the program is based on a state ranking of schools, with students in schools that are given an "F" eligible for vouchers.

These existing programs all have many problems. Despite their safeguards, these programs have ended up benefiting a wealthier, whiter population than proponents claimed they would in order to win their passage. Indeed, the actions of voucher supporters in these three sites belie their arguments about helping the disadvantaged:

- In Florida, legislators who argue that vouchers will improve education have simultaneously voted to cut back on programs for struggling students, have increased class size, and have provided inadequate funding for textbooks.[12]
- In Cleveland, the most vocal backer of the voucher plan created two schools to educate voucher students. He successfully pushed for the program to raise the income limit to families earning 200% of the federal poverty limit and above and wrote to the governor's office: "The worst result I can imagine is that the new schools would be staffed [sic] completely with low-income students."[13]
- In Milwaukee, several years after the program started, the white business community that had supported it tried to do away with those components that promoted educational equity. They wanted to drop the low-income and geographic requirements and allow children already attending private schools to receive vouchers. The legislature passed the expanded plan in 1995, but it was then blocked by a state court. Currently, the program maintains the income and geographic limits, but it allows students already in private school to participate, and it allows students to attend religious schools.

The Milwaukee program's original sponsor was Representative Polly Williams, an African American state legislator who was frustrated with the poor quality of the city's schools and wanted more educational opportunities for low-income children of color. Voucher supporters often point to her as evidence that vouchers aren't racist, and that people of color support them, too. But Williams is not fooled about their motives: "I knew from the beginning that white Republicans and rich, right-wing foundations that praised me and used me to validate their agenda would do it only as long as it suited their needs," Williams told a newspaper in 1998. "I knew that once they figured they didn't need me as black cover, they would try to take control of vouchers and use them for their own selfish interests."[14]

The California voucher plan promises to be the type of program vigorously opposed by Polly Williams and others who want equitable education for students of color. While voucher backers elsewhere are trying to wiggle around safeguards put in place to ensure that the vouchers go to the low-income urban families, in California, there would be no such safeguards to begin with–no income limit for those receiving vouchers, no tuition cap to prevent schools from charging more in tuition than low-income families with vouchers could afford, and no requirement that private schools accept voucher students.

In California, there would be no income limit for those receiving vouchers, no requirement that private schools accept voucher students.

PARENTS DON'T GET TO CHOOSE, SCHOOLS DO

Although voucher proponents argue that the California program and others would provide choice and opportunity for parents, in fact private schools would call the shots. Unlike the public schools, where anti-discrimination regulations enable parents to fight for their rights, under Proposition 38 it would be perfectly legal for private schools to discriminate. While outright racial discrimination would remain illegal, the program would allow practices that have a racist impact. Private schools could deny access to voucher students based on academic record, disciplinary record, inability to pay additional tuition, fluency in English, and their own idiosyncratic, subjective criteria. In addition, private schools would not be required to report on the racial composition of their student bodies or applicants, and there would be no mechanisms to hold them accountable if they engaged in de facto discrimination.

The program would allow practices that have a racist impact.

Private Schools Can Deny Admission to Voucher Students

Unlike public schools, which are required to accept all children living in the district, private schools under the California voucher program would be able to set up a thicket of barriers to exclude low-income students of color. One of the most significant is a record of previous academic achievement. In a 1993 California survey, 78% of the private schools that said they would accept voucher students would require such students to be achieving at grade level.[15] Nationally, almost half of private schools have admission tests.[16] This requirement can be a Catch-22 for many families –parents may want to remove their children from public schools because they are not learning enough, but they may find the private school option foreclosed precisely because the children are behind. One parent felt this situation quite keenly when she tried to take advantage of the Milwaukee voucher program: "I applied for the choice program and was told that my child could not attend the school because he had poor grades in Milwaukee Public School. But that's why I wanted to send him to a choice school."[17] Her experience would be the norm in California, according to 1993 survey entitled *What a Voucher Could Buy*published by the federally funded education research organization Southwest Regional Laboratory: "Private schools will not serve as an alternative for public school students who are not doing well academically. Such students will find few openings."[18]

Another potential barrier for students of color is a previous disciplinary record. Research shows that students of color are more likely than their white counterparts to be suspended or expelled from public schools, based largely on teachers' subjective interpretations of their interactions with students.[19] Racial bias within the public school disciplinary system would be compounded if the disciplinary record was then used to prevent a student from using a voucher at a private school. But one-

"The private sector is unlikely to educate many students from disadvantaged or language minority backgrounds, or students who need special education services."

third of all private schools and one-half of Catholic schools in California admit only those students who have no previous school suspensions.[20] Nationally, almost 75% of private schools review discipline records when deciding whether to admit students.[21] And 13% of African American students nationwide were suspended in the 1996-1997 school year alone. Similar trends are true for Latino students.[22]

California is a multi-lingual state. In fact, one-quarter of public school students are categorized as "English learners."[23] However, private schools are under no obligation to educate those for whom English is a second language. English learners make up more than 10% of the student body in fewer than one in twenty California private schools, and less than 4% of private schools provide some type of non-English language support.[24] These schools might be even less likely to accept English learners under the proposed voucher plan, because private schools accepting vouchers will have to administer the standardized tests used by the state to rank public schools. English learners, who are forced to take the standardized tests in English, do not score as well as their classmates. Thus, accepting English learners could bring down private schools' average scores, something that most schools will strive hard to prevent.

Surveys of private schools in California and nationally show that private schools are not willing to change in order to accommodate voucher students. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Education: "Only 15-31% of private schools nationally would participate in a voucher program if they were required to accept students with special needs such as learning disabilities, limited-English proficiency, or low achievement."[25] In California, according to *What a Voucher Could Buy*"The private sector does not now, and under a voucher program is unlikely to, educate many students from disadvantaged or language minority backgrounds, or students who need special education services."[26]

Another way that private schools could discriminate against voucher students is simply by charging tuition that low-income families are unable to pay. There is nothing in Proposition 38 that requires schools to accept the proposed $4,000 voucher as the full cost of tuition. Indeed, the median tuition at private schools in the National Association of Independent Schools is $10,300.[27] In a privately funded voucher experiment in New York City, 25% of the families who were offered vouchers were unable to use them; for 14% the reason was inability to pay tuition or other additional costs beyond the voucher amount. Those who were able to use the vouchers had a higher family income than those who were not.[28] In a national survey conducted by the African American think tank the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, fewer than 12% of African Americans said they could pay

more than $2,000 for tuition in addition to the voucher amount at a private school.[29]

There's No Way to Hold Private Schools Accountable for Racism.

Finally, even if parents could afford to pay the additional tuition, private schools would be under no obligation to participate in the voucher program. In fact, close to half of all private schools in California that charged a tuition of $5,000 or more in 1993 said that they would not accept voucher students.[30] These higher-tuition schools are the ones that have the smaller class sizes that many parents want for their children. In California, the private schools that are most likely to accept voucher students are Catholic schools and low-tuition schools that have class sizes similar to those in public schools (42% of Catholic schools have class sizes of 35 or more students[31]).

There's No Way to Hold Private Schools Accountable for Racism

Under Proposition 38, private schools would not be required to tell parents why they have rejected a child's admission, nor would they be required to collect data on the racial composition of their applicants or students, as public schools are required to do. Like the racial profiling conducted by police against those who are "driving while Black," private schools could screen out applicants of color. Like the police, they're not supposed to, but without a data collection system or any notification requirement to parents, how will these schools be identified and held accountable if they do engage in racial profiling?

Under pressure from voucher advocates in Milwaukee, the Wisconsin Department of Education withdrew a requirement that private schools participating in the voucher program sign an agreement to abide by the state's Pupil Nondiscrimination Act.[32] And most private schools in Milwaukee have declined to provide information about their racial composition—72% of private schools participating in the voucher program failed or refused to respond to a 1998 survey asking about their racial and gender makeup and only 17% gave complete information.[33] Research shows, however, that private schools in Milwaukee are disproportionately white. While the Milwaukee public schools are 33% white, over 84% of private school students are white, and at two of the most prominent private high schools in the city, only 3% of the students are African American.[34] Nationally, private schools are overwhelmingly white—78%—and African Americans represent a higher percentage of students in special education schools than in any other type of private school.[35]

Ultimately, the "choice" created by school vouchers is conferred not upon parents, but upon private schools that typically educate white middle-class students and screen out students with disciplinary records, poor academic achievement, or limited English. There is nothing in the California voucher plan to require them to admit a representative section of the California student body, and by their own admission they are unlikely to do so.

VOUCHERS EXACERBATE EXISTING INEQUALITY

Too many people in the voucher crowd exploit low-income black children, saying we are creating vouchers for them when what they really have in mind is bringing in a Trojan horse. . . . They can say what they want, but I've never seen a situation where low-income people, when they have to compete in education with people with far more resources, come out equal.

— Wisconsin State Representative Polly Williams[36]

Though there is a common public perception that all public schools are inadequate, many public schools, especially those in wealthy and white neighborhoods, offer excellent academic opportunities. Unfortunately, most students do not have access to such schools. The problem with schools today is more a problem of inequity than inadequacy. Public schools are not inherently flawed, but they are grossly unequal.

A pending class-action lawsuit in California, filed in May 2000 by a coalition of civil rights groups, recites a litany of deplorable conditions in many of California's worst schools. The complaint describes more than 100 schools where at least half the teaching staff lacks full credentials. Many schools have outdated textbooks and not enough seats in classrooms, while others lack bathrooms and ventilation. The problems are concentrated in schools that primarily serve students of color in urban areas. According to the complaint: "The staggering range of disparities in public education in this state offend the core constitutional principles of equality."[37] This inequitable distribution of resources magnifies the challenges facing low-income students. In fact, a recent analysis by UCLA found that poverty explained 44% of the difference between any two schools' performance on the SAT college entrance exam.[38]

A voucher system in California would only exacerbate educational inequity. The primary beneficiaries of vouchers are people who already have resources. Those low-income students who do manage to gain admission to private schools have to make do without many of the services provided by public schools, such as reduced-price lunch or transportation. And the voucher amount is insufficient to create new schools that will specifically address the needs of students of color and low-income students.

"Universal Choice Means White Choice"[39]

Vouchers are based on a free-market philosophy: the idea that competing for customers will force providers seeking customers to improve their product, with schools being the providers and education the product. However, as we see in the wildly inequitable U.S. healthcare marketplace, free enterprise programs don't work for everyone–they end up reproducing and amplifying existing inequities. As education professor Dr. Alex Molnar has written: "Left to its own devices, the market is as utterly incapable of making high-quality schools available to every child, regardless

Evidence from existing voucher programs shows that the "losers" in the vouchers game are people of color and low-income people.

of economic circumstances, as it is of providing a job for every American who needs one . . . . For the market to produce winners, there always have to be losers."[40] Evidence from existing voucher programs shows that the "losers" in the vouchers game are people of color and low-income people:

- Although Cleveland's voucher program is supposed to have a lottery favoring low-income people, the person responsible for designing the application process said that poor children whose names were selected in the lottery had apparently been passed over for higher-income children.[41] In the 1999-2000 school year, fewer than one-third of the voucher students in Cleveland came from the public schools the year before; the vast majority were already enrolled in private schools or were just starting kindergarten.[42] In 1997-98, Cleveland awarded 113 vouchers to families whose income was over 200% of the federal poverty level, including 30 to families earning between $50,000 and $90,000.[43]

- In Cleveland, public school students are approximately four times more likely to attend integrated schools than voucher students.[44]

- In the New York metropolitan region, according to a 1997 study, "school choice leads to a substantial increase in racial segregation (largely through whites shifting from public schools in cities to private schools or suburban public schools with lower nonwhite concentrations)."[45]

- The official state evaluator of the Milwaukee voucher program noted that an open-ended voucher program would aid the white families whose children were already in private school, concluding that such a program "would clearly benefit households that are more affluent than the average household in Wisconsin."[46]

- The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction cited seven vouchers schools in Milwaukee for violating the provisions of the law meant to ensure equity; the charges included imposing extra fees beyond the voucher amount.[47] The schools initially responded that, since they were private, the state could not force them to comply with the law.[48]

- Although the Milwaukee program has an income cap, parents who have participated in the voucher program have a higher level of educational achievement and parental involvement than typical parents in the Milwaukee public school district. In an analysis of four private voucher programs, a prominent voucher supporter even acknowledged: "Unrestricted choice, then, may well lead to selection effects with a class bias."[49]

- Voucher programs do not adequately inform all public school parents about how to apply. In Milwaukee, most families learn about the program from friends and relatives; 60% of parents of school children there say they know very little about the program, and 75% say they need to know more in order to form an opinion.[50] Many private schools in Milwaukee have very brief enrollment periods, or hold enrollment at unusual times, which has led to charges that the schools are consciously trying to give preference to people who are already "insiders."[51] In Florida, the 2000 deadline would have given parents less than two weeks to decide whether they wanted to participate in the program and what school they wanted their children to attend. One Florida PTA president gave the state an "F" for implementation and said that it refused parental input on how to make the process better. Another said that the confusion and short deadlines were especially difficult for immigrant parents, who were struggling to understand the program.[52]

Private Schools Lack Services that Low-Income People Need

Many of the services that low-income parents depend on in public schools are not available in private schools. These include free or reduced-price school lunches,–which 95% of public schools provide but fewer than 25% of private schools do–and medical services such as a school nurse, which 60% of public schools provide but fewer than 33% of private schools do.[53] Under the California voucher program, parents would have to pay more to ensure that their children are adequately nourished, and they would have to find health services in other, perhaps less accessible, locations.

Lack of transportation would prevent many low-income parents from even attempting to send their children to private schools. In California, in 80% of schools that would accept vouchers, three-quarters of the students are driven to school by their families and the rest walk to school. Most private schools are not accessible by bus or public transportation -these methods are available to more than half the students in only 12% of the state's private schools.[54] Thus, California parents who are unable to drive their children to school because they cannot afford a car, have inflexible work schedules, or for other reasons, would find their private school options severely limited under the voucher plan.

Other costs that parents of voucher students in private schools might have to take on include books, uniforms, and activities, none of which are typically included in tuition.[55]

There is no data to suggest that $4,000 per student is enough to start and maintain a new, high-quality school without significant outside financial support.

The Voucher Amount Is Not Enough to Establish Good Schools

When presented with the argument that private schools tend to discriminate against people of color, have limited space available to absorb public school students, and often charge more than low-income people can afford, voucher proponents argue that a voucher system will encourage the founding of new private schools that would cater specifically to the needs of communities of color or low-income communities. While it is true that a number of the schools in the Milwaukee voucher program are predominantly African American and have Afrocentric curricula, these schools were already established before the voucher program went into effect.

In Cleveland, a major supporter of the voucher program opened two schools specifically for voucher students, but when Ohio adopted a charter-school program he converted them to charter schools because charter schools received more state funding. The supporter told the governor that he was subsidizing the voucher schools out of his own pocket.[56] Prior to the schools' conversion, the academic achievement of students at the two voucher schools was significantly below that of students in Cleveland public schools.[57]

The California voucher program would provide families with vouchers worth $4,000, nearly $2,000 less than California's current per-pupil spending and $3,000 less than the national per-pupil spending average. California's current spending is already inadequate to provide all children with a good education, yet the current amount does not have to go toward establishing new infrastructure. New voucher schools, however, would have to devote significant resources to start-up costs. Although there is a significant group of private schools in California that charges $4,000 or less in tuition, most of these are religious schools,[58] which are subsidized by contributions from their congregations and, like the Milwaukee schools and the public schools, are already established. There is no data to suggest that $4,000 per student is enough to start and maintain a new, high-quality school without significant outside financial support.

A CALIFORNIA VOUCHER PROGRAM WOULD LEAVE MOST STUDENTS OF COLOR IN WEAKENED PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Private schools in California simply lack the space to accommodate a significant proportion of public school students.

Private schools in California simply lack the space to accommodate a significant proportion of public school students. According to survey results documented in *What a Voucher Could Buy*"Less than 1% of public school students can expect to find additional spaces in private schools under existing conditions; even the most generous estimates yield no more than a 6% expansion. . . . Private schools' level of interest aside, a statewide voucher program will not significantly affect public school enrollment in the foreseeable future."[59]

Particularly troubling for low-income parents and parents of color is the fact that over half of Catholic schools are at 95% capacity. Catholic schools are the most likely to accept the voucher amount as full tuition, they have expressed more interest in accepting students from public schools than most non-religious schools, and they already have a significantly higher percentage of students of color than other private schools in the state.[60] A separate study of all private elementary schools in San Francisco found that 59% of them were religious schools; of the non-religious schools, fewer than 1% charged $4,000 or less in tuition in 1993.[61] If Proposition 38 were implemented, once the few spaces in Catholic or other religious schools filled up, or if parents did not want to send their children to religious schools, it would be almost impossible for low-income parents and parents of color to find space in other private schools.

The result is that most students of color would remain in public schools under the California voucher plan. While proponents argue that vouchers would provide "immediate relief" to parents struggling in the public schools, research indicates that the public schools–and nearly all their current students–would actually experience immediate pain.

For example, Proposition 38 in California would end guaranteed funding for community colleges, adult education, and childcare programs. Like K-12 schools, these programs are currently paid for through a constitutionally guaranteed state funding mechanism that requires a minimum of 40% of the state budget to be spent on education. The voucher plan would permanently eliminate this funding guarantee once California K-12 spending reached the per-pupil national average, replacing it with a new system tied to the national average that would cover K-12 education only. Community colleges, adult education, and childcare programs would then have to compete with other programs for general state funds. The measure would also end the voter-initiated guarantee (through Prop. 98) that the state must spend a minimum percentage of its budget on education; education funding would again become a political football so long as the state did not drop below the national average in per pupil spending.

Thus, under Proposition 38, most California students of color would remain in the public schools, but resources would be drained from the public system, leaving students with fewer services and opportunities than they have today.

SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION REFORM DOES NOT EQUAL SUPPORT FOR PROPOSITION 38

Schools in urban communities of color are inadequate and unequal, and people of color know this. Polls consistently show a gap of as much as 30 percent between African Americans' satisfaction with the public school system and whites' satisfaction.[62] People of color also represent a disproportionately high percentage of public school students when compared to their percentage of the population as a whole, and their average age is lower than that of white Californians.[63] As a result, people of color, on the whole, have a greater interest in the public school system and are more eager to embrace a range of education reform measures than are whites in California.

A close look at the "data" behind some of the voucher polling reveals that conservative voucher proponents are not actually interested in learning what communities of color really want.

Voucher proponents eagerly point to public opinion polls to argue that African Americans and other people of color support vouchers. However, this characterization is misleading for several reasons: 1) the conservative-backed polls that show the highest voucher support among people of color are constructed to elicit the pollsters' desired response rather than actually explore respondents' attitudes about public education, and most reputable polls show that a majority of respondents do not support vouchers; 2) to segregate support for vouchers from support for other reform is to misrepresent the attitudes of people of color toward education improvement measures; 3) people of color, as is true of the general population, know very little about the reality of vouchers, and their support is largely based merely on abstract hope.

Polls Are Misleading

A close look at the "data" behind some of the voucher polling reveals that conservative voucher proponents are not actually interested in learning what communities of color really want. For example, supporters often cite results of a 1995 poll of African Americans in Milwaukee, conducted by the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, that found a 95% approval rating for the local voucher program.[64] But the question that elicited this response was far from methodologically sound: "Do you think that parents in your area should or should not have the right to choose which local schools their children will attend?" Few people could disagree with such an obviously weighted question, and support for this statement hardly equals support for vouchers.

Other polls similarly manipulate questions in order to claim legitimacy from people of color without having to actually grapple with any of the real issues about why schools are not providing this population with an adequate education. A 1991 Reason Foundation poll intended to "survey voter opinion of a choice approach to education" in advance of California's last school voucher initiative, in 1993, asked

respondents to choose which of the following statements they agreed with: "Supporters say choice would make schools more accountable to parents, especially poor and minority parents; opponents say parents generally are not interested or competent enough to choose the right school for their children." The poll's authors then used the results of this absurdly weighted question to assert that "more than 71% of respondents showed support for choice because it offers greater accountability to parents."[65]

While more reputable polls do tend to show people of color favoring vouchers at a higher rate than whites, most polls also show that a majority of both people of color and whites do not support vouchers. For instance, a recent poll conducted by the New York Urban League found 59% of African Americans are against vouchers, while a 1999 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll found that 70% of respondents, regardless of demographics, support improving existing public schools over providing vouchers.[66] And a California poll from January 2000 shows that 54% of all California adults and 53% of all Latino adults do not support taxpayer-funded vouchers.[67]

Voucher Support Cannot Be Isolated from Support for General Education Reform

Frustrated by inadequate local public schools, people of color nationally and in California are more inclined to institute education reforms than are whites. For example, 82% of African Americans nationwide believe that the government is spending too little on education, while 68% of whites express that opinion.[68] In a 1998 California poll that asked respondents whether they supported higher standards or increased funding, African Americans were more likely than whites to say they supported both.[69] And a 1996 poll of Californians shows that Asian, Latino, and African American adults are more supportive of increasing funding for schools, providing professional development to teachers, teaching respect for various races and cultures, and providing additional school-based services such as health care and after-school programs than are their white counterparts.[70]

Support Is Not Based on Realities of Voucher Programs

The general population has a very low level of knowledge about voucher programs, according to research by Public Agenda. Indeed, 63% of American adults say they know nothing, or at best very little, about vouchers. This is true even in Cleveland and Milwaukee, which already have voucher programs. 75% of parents of school-age children say they need more information about vouchers in order to form an opinion. Based on these findings, Public Agenda asserts that "it's hard to overstate how unfamiliar and confusing these proposals are to most citizens, parents included."[71]

Public opinion polls don't give respondents any information that would increase their knowledge of voucher programs.

Public opinion polls don't give respondents any information that would increase their knowledge of voucher programs. To the contrary, even methodologically sound polls ask respondents only about a generalized theory that may have little to do with reality. A 1999 poll conducted by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies found that a majority of its African American respondents supported vouchers. But the question asked was: "Would you support a voucher system where parents would get money from the government to send their children to the public, private, or parochial school of their choice?"[72] The poll does not explain to respondents that vouchers might not cover the full cost of tuition, that private schools could discriminate against voucher students, and that parents might end up with very little "choice" at all.

Thus, support for vouchers among people of color seems to be based more on the hope that they will provide an escape from the ills of public schools than it is on the specifics of voucher programs, especially the proposed California program. For example, in a 1998 poll, 53% of African Americans said vouchers should be means-tested, which California's Proposition 38 voucher program would not be; and 20% believed that vouchers should be worth $10,000. Only 28% said vouchers should be worth less than $5,000–California is offering $4,000.[73]

Unfortunately, as this report shows, the hopes of people of color for education reform do not match the realities of voucher programs. As Kweisi Mfume, president of the NAACP, has said: "Voucher proposals take many forms, and some are designed to deliberately disguise the basic realities that will result over time. The best students will be skimmed off–those whom private schools find desirable for their own reasons. Since families will have to make up additional costs, those in the upper- and middle-income brackets will be helped the most . . . Skin color, religion, economic class, language group, need for remedial work–all these things would be barriers to acceptance and success in a system designed around the choices of the private schools, not the choices of parents and students."[74]

A REAL REFORM FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR: EQUITY & EXCELLENCE FOR EVERYONE

There's an old adage that the fundamentals of education are the "3 Rs"—reading, writing, and 'rithmetic. Today, the guiding principle of fundamental school reform must be based on the "3 Es"—Excellence and Equity for Everyone. Excellence without equity breeds division, while equity without excellence breeds mediocrity. The standard for any new education reform proposal and public policy must consider equity as fully as excellence or it will merely create new problems in the form of unintended consequences. The vouchers proposal can promise neither excellence nor equity. Vouchers are a politically-motivated, shortsighted proposal that will leave most students in California worse off than they are today. We cannot afford to waste more time and lives on untested, unsound, and inequitable proposals.

Clearly, many parents and students of color and those from low-income households are desperate for change and justifiably want:

- Access to high-quality schools and relief from substandard ones;
- High standards and expectations and relief from mediocrity and low expectations; and
- Equal opportunities for academic success and relief from racial inequality.

These are the issues that must be addressed. Although vouchers are currently being touted as the magic solution to school reform, there is no evidence that vouchers will have any positive results. In fact, as this report shows, vouchers are likely to aggravate existing inadequacies and inequities in our schools. They do not guarantee, or even strive to produce, equal access and equal opportunities, nor do they show any track record of producing high standards. A more promising approach is to rely on proven solutions backed by voluminous credible academic research–solutions aimed at achieving the goal of equal high-quality education for all students. The SMART Schools proposal below offers a far better blueprint than vouchers for redirecting our public education policies and funding priorities in ways that are academically sound and equitable.

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The **SMART** *Schools Proposal*

Small classes and schools
Money for quality education for all students, especially those with the greatest need
Authentic assessment and high standards instead of standardized high-stakes tests
Racial and economic equity in educational policies, opportunities, and outcomes
Top-notch teaching and rigorous curriculum

These five areas are briefly addressed below. The Applied Research Center and many leading experts in the academic community have already elaborated the need and justification for these proposals in other reports.

Small Classes and Schools: Mounting evidence shows that small classroom sizes and small schools are one of the best ways to raise academic achievement. Programs such as Students Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) in Wisconsin and Project Star in Tennessee have shown gains for young students in small classes, especially African Americans in inner-city schools.[75] California has begun to reduce its class sizes in the early primary grades and the first year of high school. These programs need to be expanded and fully funded to cover all resulting costs, including the new classrooms needed when fewer students are assigned to each existing classroom. It is also critical that new class-size reduction programs be phased in so as to prioritize the highest-need schools in order to achieve equitable results, and that the need for additional teachers to staff the additional classrooms be addressed.

Money for high-quality education and high-need students: Since the implementation of California's Proposition 13, schools have been insufficiently funded. Per-pupil spending in California ranks well below the national average, and student achievement is among the lowest in the nation. California public schools are grossly unequal in their staffing, classroom materials, and facilities, and these inequities are directly related to funding disparities between schools and school districts. Any serious attempt to return California's schools to the top tier nationally, a position they held prior to Proposition 13, must squarely address the need for more money directed to schools that are currently failing too many children of color. It is a telling reflection of our state's priorities when the starting salary paid to prison guards exceeds that of teachers, and expenditure on prisons competes with education expenditures. If education is truly the top priority, as Governor Davis claims it is, shifting public money to reflect this commitment is imperative.

Authentic Assessment: High-stakes standardized tests, which have been implemented in California in recent years, will aggravate racial inequality. These tests, in the form of the Stanford 9 exam now tied to the Academic Performance Index, along with the soon-to-be-implemented high school exit exam, will result in disproportionate numbers of people of color dropping out of school or being denied diplomas. The tests themselves, and the high-stakes systems of rewards and sanctions to which they are tied, have inherent racial biases. They too often merely measure students' past academic opportunities (or lack thereof), rather than validly assessing students' capacities or predicting future performance. A number of uni-

versities are dropping the use of one of the leading standardized test–the SAT exam–due to its dubious validity and racially disparate results.[76] Leading scholars contend that multiple and authentic assessment measures, such as student portfolios that document actual work and progress, are more academically sound and equitable.[77]

Racial and economic equity: On nearly every key indicatr–dropout rates, disciplinary rates, graduation rates and college entrance rates–significant racial disparities exist in our schools.[78] The racial and economic implications of current and proposed education policies must be fully assessed using thorough data collection disaggregated by race and income, public disclosure of that data, high-caliber research, and full consideration of racial outcomes by policy-makers. Racial equity must be measured not by intent, but by impact-the actual outcomes by race on key indicators such as access to advanced placement courses, graduation rates, and college entrance rates. Every school and school district should collect full data, make public annual racial equity reports, and develop workable plans to address racial disparitic

Top-notch teaching: Widespread experience has proven that schools can increase student achievement by providing fully certified, highly skilled teachers. Currently, California grants some 34,000 emergency teaching permits, mostly in schools with high populations of students of color, due to a myriad of ineffective and inequitable teacher credentialing policies. "The shortage of teachers in California is self-inflicted," according to Stanford education professor Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond. California must overhaul its system for teacher recruitment, training, induction, retention, and ongoing professional development. There are many viable proposals through which to accomplish this, including expanding scholarship and loan programs to low-income prospective teachers, establishing high-quality teacher recruitment and training programs at hard-to-staff schools, providing more professional support to beginning teachers and better professional development opportunities to continuing teachers, and increasing compensation to attract and retain high-quality teachers.[79]

None of these SMART proposals are quick-fix solutions, but all of them can yield both immediate and long-term substantive benefit. All are backed by sound principles and solid research. It is not the solutions that are lacking—it is the political will and public commitment to achieve excellent and equitable education available to everyone.

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CONCLUSION

"Using public dollars for vouchers instead of investing in programs that we know work will only delay our ability to provide a high-quality education for all children."

— Ohio State Representative C.J. Prentiss[80]

Proposition 38 is not an escape hatch out of struggling urban schools for students and parents. It is instead a trap that would keep the vast majority of low-income students and students of color in public schools that have even less funding while wealthier white private school students get a financial break. Unlike the public school system, private schools would not have any monitoring or accountability measures to guard against discrimination. And, regardless of their intent, the impact of private schools' admission policies—and of voucher programs in general—is racially biased.

Finally, there is no reliable evidence that academic achievement improves under voucher programs, so even the few students from troubled public schools who could find places in private schools would not necessarily receive a better education. They would, however, have to do without some of the important services provided by public schools, such as health care, subsidized meals, and transportation. Now is the time for Californians to demand that schools provide an excellent and equitable education to every student, not to increase educational inequity by falling for the misleading promises of Proposition 38.

RESOURCES

• *Rethinking Schools*. Internet: www.rethinkingschools.org ; Phone: 414-964-
9646. This education organization is based in Milwaukee and has a lot of good material critiquing voucher programs. A special vouchers section on the web site (www.rethinkingschools.org/SpecPub/voucher.htm) also has links to other organizations. A number of articles on vouchers are collected in Selling
Out Our Schools: Vouchers, Markets, and the Future of Public Education , which addresses the conservative agenda behind school vouchers, vouchers' negative impact on equity, and voucher programs in Milwaukee, Chile, and elsewhere.

• People for the American Way Foundation. Internet: www.pfaw.org/issues/edu - cation/ Phone: (202) 467-4999. People for the American Way has a variety of voucher material on its web site, including: Apples vs. Oranges: A Critique of Two Flawed Studies of Vouchers and Integration (1999); Grand Illusions: A Look at Who Backs School Vouchers, Who Profits, and the Dismal Performance of Vouchers to Date(1999); and a series of fact sheets about vouchers. PFAW has joined with the NAACP to form Partners in Public Education: www.everychildcounts.org

• The American Federation of Teachers devotes a section of its web site to vouchers: www.aft.org/research/vouchers/index.htm .

• The Wisconsin Education Association Council has a collection of voucher information on its web site: www.weac.org .

• www.novouchers2000.com The web site of the anti-Proposition 38 campaign led by state education organizations. The site has information about the proposition, articles and editorials from California newspapers, and statements by opponents to Proposition 38.

• www.schoolvouchers.com The official "Yes on Proposition 38" web site. See what the proponents are saying, but beware of inaccuracies. This site has a copy of the complete text of the initiative.

• A copy of the California Legislative Analyst's Office analysis of Proposition 38 can be located at: www.lao.ca.gov/initiatives/qryPropositions_by_election_11-2000.asp .

• What a Voucher Could Buy: A Survey of California's Private Schools , Marcella R. Diana and Ronald G. Corwin, Southwest Regional Laboratory, 1993. This

report contains valuable information on private schools in California and their willingness and ability to accept voucher students. It can be obtained from WestEd, Internet: www.wested.org ; Phone (415)565-3000. WestEd may release updated information linked to Proposition 38 before the November election.

• Smaller Classes, Not Vouchers, Increase Student Achievement , Alex Molnar, Keystone Research Center. This report analyzes data from the Milwaukee voucher program on student achievement and finds that no strong evidence exists that participation in a voucher program increases student achievement. It then uses evidence from a variety of programs to show that reducing class size improves student achievement. It can be obtained from Keystone Research Center, 412 North Third Street, Harrisburg, PA 17101; Phone 717-244-7181; Fax 717-255-7193.

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U.S. Department of Education
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